

## Introduction

### Sex Scandals and Discourses of Power

On the day before President Bill Clinton left office, the news broke that he had struck a deal with the Office of the Independent Counsel. Clinton admitted to having provided false testimony regarding his relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case. In exchange, the soon-to-be ex-president received immunity from prosecution for perjury and related offenses. Pundits wrangled over whom the deal favored, Clinton or his accusers. They agreed, however, that most of the public was simply relieved to see the matter of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal finally—apparently—brought to a conclusion. Yet the dogged persistence of the scandal through the very last hours of the Clinton administration hardly allowed for much optimism that sex scandals would remain off the main docket of the electronic court of public opinion for very long. To the contrary, the timing of the deal transparently signaled the determination of the contestants to use every available advantage in fighting the battle at hand, and thus portended no ebbing of blood lust as similar occasions arise in the future.

**The Deepening Muck of Scandal** There is a general sense among politicians, commentators, and the American public at large that at some point during the past fifteen years, a line was crossed. After the exposure of Gary Hart's infidelity (on the good ship *Monkey Business*) ended his 1987 presidential primary run, after Anita Hill's charges of sexual harassment nearly derailed Clarence Thomas's confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court, after Bob Packwood's ignominious exit from the U.S. Senate for just such behavior, and especially after Bill and Monica, Americans from most reaches of the ideological spec-

trum wonder whether so much fanfare over the sexual lives of political leaders is genuinely necessary to a well-functioning polity. For some, the problem is that U.S. politics has veered beyond commonly recognized bounds of good taste and propriety, filling TV and computer screens with an overabundance of explicit sexual content, even as major party politicians try to outdo one another in inveighing against the sexual excesses of Hollywood, the popular music industry, and online pornography. Others are concerned that political competition has become focused on matters that are trivial when compared to presumptively grander affairs of state, such as concluding international treaties or formulating industrial or banking policy. Some even suspect a bad faith effort by elites to divert the public's attention from these weighty issues by channeling public discourse into these foul and shallow waters. Politically diverse interests and individuals certainly find some of these scandals more defensible than others, but few seem happy about the extent to which the political culture as a whole has been sexualized.

This book grew out of a shared insistence among its contributors that a more nuanced critical engagement with the politics of sex scandals is both possible and urgently needed. Those who hope American public life might become more participatory and inclusive, and that it might provide more effective avenues for ordinary citizens to define the substance of public policy, should above all not react to the surfeit of sex in political discourse by ignoring it for fear that to address scandals directly only enhances their already undue influence. Nor is it wise simply to dismiss the intensified sexual scrutiny of political leaders as evincing a general regression of the public psyche, or as a tip-off to the manipulations of officials who want to insulate public policy from the citizenry. Again, these interpretations of recent events would logically prompt us to shift critical attention from sex scandals to other events in the shadows looming beyond the media spotlight's glare. We argue instead that sex scandals themselves provide particularly fructuous vantage points from which to gain critical perspective on structural aspects of public life in the United States: the narratives according to which ethical norms of the culture industries become effectual; the consumerist logic of the public sphere; the dynamics of the political party system in relation to the constitutional separation of powers; the institutions intended to ensure political leaders' accountability to the public for their official actions; the construction of citizenship as participation in the media spectacle; and the discourses enabling and constraining challenges to racial, gender, and sexual privilege. By chart-

ing a critical path through rather than around the muck of scandal, we not only attain clearer sightings of the complex dynamics of these major sites of political contestation, but we also grasp the reasons why, in these structural contexts, sex scandals have become anything but peripheral to American public life.

**The Guilty Pleasures of the Public** Some important work in cultural studies has drawn just this sort of needed attention to recent sex scandals. Toni Morrison's collection *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* (1992) examined the multiple discourses of race, gender, and class that circulated through the scandal surrounding Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination hearings. *Our Monica, Ourselves* (2001), edited by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan, offered similar analyses of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, with focused attention on discourses of sexuality. This collection is intended to bring together reflections on a variety of different sex scandals in U.S. political culture, though with an emphasis on the Clinton scandal, which was certainly the most avidly followed and consequential political sex scandal in this country's history. Together, these essays tease out the broad implications of sex scandal politics for the meaning, constitution, and agency of the public, or more concretely, for the prospects of cultural critique and democratic action by discrete, socially situated publics. The intellectual scope of this volume, moreover, extends beyond cultural studies, bringing critical cultural theory into a conversation with political-scientific writing on the role of scandal politics in general in the institutional development of liberal democracies.

We suggest that a scandal be understood as the publicization of a transgression of a social norm. Because a scandal is a public disgrace, what is at stake is the transgressor's public value, that is, her or his reputation. A sound reputation depends, above all, on conformity to established and generally held social norms. For this reason, accusations of hypocrisy typically do not produce scandals, for they involve the violation of particularized rather than universally shared norms, even though alleged or demonstrated hypocrisy certainly can detract from leaders' political viability by creating personal embarrassment and damaging their constituency's estimation of their moral stature. If, for example, vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman had campaigned on a Saturday, he surely would have been criticized for lacking character and selling out, and this might have adversely impacted both his vote totals in Connecticut's senatorial race and the electoral for-

tunes of the Gore-Lieberman ticket. Nonetheless, only those Americans who believe that a leader must observe the Sabbath to exercise legitimate political leadership would have considered his actions to be scandalous—or so it would seem. Interpreting this hypothetical situation becomes trickier if we take into account the majoritarian sentiment in the United States that to exercise legitimate authority political leaders must identify themselves with a mainstream religious institution and show themselves to be pious (or at least avoid being exposed as impious) within whatever faith tradition they embrace. Given this political-cultural context, such a departure from principled practice by Lieberman might well have sparked a general scandal. In any case, different kinds of censure flow from the violations of different norms, because specific norms are situated differently with respect to existing discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For example, some have argued that Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky displayed distinctly "queer" aspects, for instance, their play with sexual objects, which contravene conventions of heteronormativity. These particular bodily transgressions of such norms doubtless signaled a more urgent threat than would have been presented by any digression by Lieberman from the weekly routine of the faithful family.<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, a transgression is necessary, but not sufficient, for a scandal. Publicity is essential. Every scandal thus involves a double boundary crossing: the violation of the norm involved in the scandalous act itself, and that act's exceptional manifestation before the public.<sup>2</sup> Some scandals presuppose—and capitalize on for shock value—an underlying societal expectation of respect for a distinction between personal or intimate affairs and matters that strangers have a legitimate interest in knowing. The events involving actor Hugh Grant discussed in Joshua Gamson's essay, as well as the simple fact of Clinton's adulterous relationship with Lewinsky (apart from the charges of perjury or obstruction of justice), were scandals of this order. In other scandals, publicity involves breaching the boundary dividing an institution's internal business from those aspects of the institution's operations that are subjected to regular public scrutiny. Teapot Dome and the Iran-Contra affair, analyzed here by Theodore J. Lowi, exemplify this sort of scandal, along with, arguably (given the normative structures of American pentecostalism), the revelations of Jimmy Swagart's sexual and financial "sins."

What distinguishes sex scandals from other kinds of political scandals? Recent experience suggests that sex scandals have a singular capacity to capture the public imagination—in ways, to be sure, that

make the public distinctly uncomfortable. Just think about the difference between the popular reception of Whitewater and Monicagate: had the details of the Whitewater probe held the public's interest, it is doubtful that Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr would have meandered into the tenuously related domain of the Paula Jones case in the first place. Part of the explanation for the prominence and tenacity of sex scandals lies in the fact that accusations of sexual impropriety are scandalous in and of themselves, unlike charges of financial misdealings or abuse of power, which generally need to be meticulously documented before being given even a fleeting place in the public's conception of the national agenda. However, the threshold for publicizing alleged sexual misconduct evidently is much lower than in the case of other kinds of misbehavior. When it comes to discussions of sexual impropriety, gossip is the prevailing lingua franca, regardless of whether the conversational venue is the proverbial water cooler or the national media.

But although the public consumes sex scandals avidly, it also does so ambivalently. And to the extent that citizens register not just prurient interest but disgust over the increasingly common occurrence of sex scandals, they are not sure whom to blame — and rightly so. On the one hand, sex scandals provoke frustration with the difficulty of challenging the corporations whose structural orientation toward the creation of private profit underlies and motivates these media events. The capacity of ordinary citizens to “choose” to follow sex scandals as news is highly compromised by the multiple ways consumer “choices” in this area are effects rather than determinants of the actions of culture industries and political parties. For many, sex scandals are detestable because they exemplify this pseudo-democratic aspect of American public life. Perhaps no recent scandal was more deserving of such reactions than the Gary Condit scandal. The mysterious disappearance of Chandra Levy in 2001 was perfect midsummer fare: a story fueled by innuendo, covered around the clock even in the absence of new or newsworthy developments, and baldly appealing to viewers' desire for juicy entertainment rather than their concern for the public interest. On the other hand, the public's desires, even (or perhaps especially) in this extreme case, are not wholly the products of strategic corporate and political action, however embedded such action is in fundamental social structures. Sex scandals depend on citizens' willingness, even eagerness, to indulge the guilty pleasure of watching them flower, and on some level the public knows that it bears some responsibility for the cupidity with which it seeks such pleasures. Indeed, the feelings of

degradation and shame that accompany absorption in a sex scandal, as Foucault suggests, are very likely related in a positive way to the degree of pleasure that these events make possible, enhancing their capacity to fascinate. In other kinds of scandals, such as those regarding financial misdealings, the shame tends to stay confined to the individual charged with the misdeed. Not so with sex scandals. This mirroring effect, a special form of guilt by association, suggests that the boundaries enabling the public to view sex scandals from a safe and detached distance are unusually thin, unsteady, and permeable. When a sex scandal occurs, the public cannot depend on being able to stand apart in smug judgment of the alleged malefactor. Inevitably, the potential guilt of the accused becomes the spectators' guilt as well.

Because the shame in admitting that one "likes to watch" is peculiar to sex scandals, we suspect that the cries against sex scandals have more to do with the fact that politics has been sexualized than that it has been scandalized. But it is important to be clear about what it means to sexualize politics, for in more or less explicit terms, sex and sexuality have long been a constitutive feature of politics and political discourse in the United States. We have always expected our leaders to be potent and virile, and we have often taken pride in an official appetite for conquest, whether military or, more recently, corporate. Indeed, sexual metaphors have long pervaded political discourse in the United States. The imbrication of political and sexual talk is, in fact, a common feature of political scandals in general. Consider, for example, the Lincoln Bedroom controversy that arose during Clinton's first term of office. The Clintons were not simply denounced for using public facilities to raise campaign funds; they were specifically and repeatedly reviled for "prostituting" themselves to wealthy donors. Violating the sexual integrity of the national boudoir became a highly effective metaphor for the transgression of unofficial standards of propriety regarding the maintenance of a safe distance between political fundraising and state business. At the same time, the fact that this outcry was raised at all, when quite similar events went unreported during the preceding Republican administrations, may have betrayed a certain discomfort on the right with the "scandal" of Clinton's election as the representative of the nation despite his lack of wealth and prestige. As was the case with the Lewinsky scandal, criticism of Clinton's sexuality provided a comfortable way to attack him in a country notoriously squeamish about discussions of class: as embarrassing as it may be to talk about sex, with Clinton, it seemed easier than broaching the touchy matter of his unseemly origins. Sex talk, then, often furnishes the discourse

in which other public controversies are encrypted. As such, it both expresses and reinforces the failure to address these scandals in an explicit and democratic manner, and it has functioned in these ways historically as well as in recent times. In the end, then, it may be more accurate to say that sex scandals do not so much sexualize politics as force us to confront the degree to which sex and sexuality permeate the political universe.

Even so, the role of sex in public discourse has mutated rapidly and in important ways in recent years. The sources of this shift are multiple and interrelated, including the advent of new communication technologies, the economic restructuring of the corporate media, and the particular political logics of the right wing in the United States. In the past, public discourse has been sexualized without necessarily focusing substantively on scandals involving the sexual activities of national leaders. Consider that scandals, in general, have been a fixture in U.S. politics since the earliest days of the republic, perhaps all too readily accepted as part of the price we must pay for living in a polity officially committed to freedom of the press. Yet even in a country that has long prided itself on protecting investigative journalism, until roughly fifteen years ago U.S. politics proved an inhospitable environment for scandalmongering of a sexual kind. Prior to the 1980s, leaders in politics and journalism minimized public discourse about the sexual hijinks of presidents and other principal figures in national politics. From Thomas Jefferson's affair with his slave Sally Hemings to John F. Kennedy's notorious indulgences, public officials strayed beyond the bounds of sexual propriety—with the knowledge, at least, of those in their intimate social and political circles. But it is only recently that these matters have attained the status of front-page news. Indeed, comparative studies of political scandal and corruption have often used the U.S. case, where until recently these phenomena were focused almost exclusively on the misuse of money and influence, as a foil for countries where political sex scandals were much more common, notably Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, what has changed is not the behavior of public officials, which consistently has failed to live up to public standards, but rather American society's willingness and desire to talk about it.

### **Sex Scandals and the (De)Composition of the Public/Private Divide**

At least on the surface, the increasingly commonplace occurrence of sex scandals in U.S. politics seems to reflect disruption and ambi-

guity in the politicocultural norms defining and separating the public and private realms. Pointing to a dwindling respect for a traditional public/private distinction is one powerfully resonant way to narrate the historical transition that has made sex scandals involving political leaders more mundane today than they were forty years ago. The story is that because Americans have lost a sense for the value of segregating public from private concerns, as well as a sense of where the dividing line lies, they imprudently indulge either their utopian desires for a government “administered by angels” or their carnal appetites by generating and following sex scandals.

Whether this account is adequate to recent events depends significantly on how the terms public and private are defined. We take it as both logically and empirically the case that the public and private realms are mutually constitutive: the realm of the public appears rational, orderly, and oriented toward universality precisely by differentiating itself from private matters, defined as irrational, disorderly, and guided by particularity. The public realm can be differentiated from the private realm by excluding the latter, but public matters can also be distinguished from private affairs insofar as the former include the latter in planned, disciplined ways, such that the regulation of the private is productive of power. Here we borrow from Foucault the notions that power is generated when disciplinary practices are institutionalized and normalized, and that power constitutes the agencies that are involved in these relational processes, rather than being simply a “thing” that one entity can possess and use instrumentally to influence another entity. To take the example of religion and the liberal state, the constitutional imperative to maintain a balance between freedom of religious expression and religious disestablishment means that public power comes into being as the power ensuring that religious expression is channeled into certain venues and not into others: religion is constituted as a private activity (even as the private realm is constituted as the sphere of faith and individual conscience), and in turn the public realm is constituted as the agency disciplining religion (and embodying a universal rationality that transcends private, particularistic spirituality). The myriad and continuing historical adjustments, through judicial decisions and public policy changes, of what is commonly thought of as “the state’s power to intervene in religious affairs” reflect the fact that neither the public nor the private realm is an entity that exists with an enduring, stable self-identity; rather, both are continually being re-produced and refashioned as the relations of power linking them together in a disciplinary matrix are altered. A crucial

effect of these power relations, finally, is the appearance of the legitimacy of the state, which hinges on the maintenance of a strict distinction between the rational, orderly, universally oriented public realm and the irrational, disorderly, particularistic private realm.

When a political scandal occurs, part of what is shocking is the fact that the revelation of this deed forces private desire to appear in a public space where it is supposed to be absent or invisible. This particular shock effect of scandal consists in the troubling sensation that the public/private binary might not be so natural and secure after all, that public agency ultimately may not operate in a (rational) manner wholly or sharply distinct from (irrational) private life. Indeed, often the transgression at the heart of a scandal is something quite commonplace, such as adultery; in these cases, for some people, this boundary crossing may actually be more of a shock than the violation itself. At the same time, a breach of the public/private boundary is only likely to seem worthy of publicity to scandalmongers when the private conduct at issue has attained a certain intensity of disciplinary intertwinement with the public realm, and hence has become constitutive of public agency to an especially significant degree. Thus, for example, if Lieberman's hypothetical decision to campaign on the Sabbath were in fact to touch off a scandal, this would reflect the great extent to which religious life in the United States is enmeshed in regulatory discourses involving state agency and establishing the public and private realms as separate and distinct entities.

These considerations point to a key reason studying scandals is valuable: analyzing scandals can reveal much about historically distinctive constructions of the public/private divide, shedding light on those elements of privacy whose containment, channeling, or sublimation has become especially generative of the power that constitutes public agency. More specifically, this framework of analysis can help us explain why sex scandals are proliferating in the contemporary United States. It suggests that we see these scandals as evidence that discourses of sexuality are pivotal today to the circulations of power reproducing the public and private realms and legitimating the social order, and it invites us to consider the particular forms of regulation of private sexual life on which the constitution of public agency depends. Some especially prominent regulatory forms of this sort are the growing though embattled awareness and discipline of sexual harassment; the discursive economy in which Christian conservatives and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activists struggle over the meaning and legal definition of marriage; and the proliferation of sexually ex-

plicit and sex-focused talk shows in television culture. Certainly, the causes of the recent plenitude of sex scandals can be found in multiple and precedent historical events, for example, as some of our authors discuss, the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the feminist movement's insistence that "the personal is the political," changes in the law defining spheres of privacy, and the politics of family preservation waged by the Christian right. But we would argue as well that sex scandals now abound in the United States because it is to a significant extent through the discipline of sexuality that political power comes to seem normal, efficacious, and just at this historical juncture.

What are the consequences of sex scandals for these disciplinary discourses and for the public/private divide? Do sex scandals destabilize or reinforce established power relations—or both? On the one hand, sex scandals (re)enact the regulation of sexuality by defining temporary breakdowns in the network that binds public agency to sexual desire as crises and then focusing public forces on the problem of sorting out and maintaining the proper relationship between these two domains. Sex scandals thus reflect and reproduce hegemonic constructions of the public/private distinction, at least in part. They occasion the expression of displeasure at an evident disrespect for boundaries and thereby reproduce respect for those same boundaries, renewing and strengthening efforts to contain, channel, and sublimate the private conduct at issue. In doing so, they reinforce the legitimacy and perceived naturalness of making this distinction at all. On the other hand, sex scandals demonstrate that the public/private boundary can be breached and is in need of policing. They expose this limit and the realms it demarcates as fragile, historically mutable, and contingent on deliberately constructive effort rather than natural or existing in themselves. They demonstrate, moreover, that the power composing this boundary can be—indeed, is being—challenged. Sex scandals are thus symptomatic of contestation over where to draw the line between public and private with regard to sex, and insofar as they bring such contestation to light, they inherently deconstruct the notion of the public/private distinction as a universal truth that is simply given to the rational mind. They have the potential, then, to unsettle the discourses regulating sexuality that depend on this distinction to seem normal and legitimate.

The Clinton scandal illustrates the complex and sometimes contradictory effects of sex scandals on both historically particular constructions of the public/private divide and the reigning liberal ideology that such a distinction is necessary and foundational for a political com-

munity that values liberty, prosperity, and social order. Congressional Democratic leaders were for the most part in synch with majority, polled public opinion in declaring the scandal itself to be scandalous. For them, publicizing Clinton's affair with Lewinsky violated an existing norm defining marital infidelity and sexual behavior as private matters unsuited and irrelevant to the realm of public officialdom. Recall, for example, the comments in congressional chambers and to the media of House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt and House Minority Whip David Bonior, both of whom lamented the egregious disrespect for privacy and personal freedom that, in their view, the attack on Clinton exhibited. In the Clinton affair, it was thus most explicitly Democrats and liberals who set out to defend a particular distinction between public and private realms, a distinction grounded in traditional norms. These actors sought to refortify the normative status of these principles, although by explicitly invoking and attempting to vindicate them, they involuntarily acknowledged that these norms could no longer be taken for granted and thus underscored their contested and precarious status. Most obviously, this response was rooted in a combination of partisan interests and genuine commitment to the principles they claimed were at stake. Somewhat less evident, but perhaps more important, their responses may also have been symptoms of their investments, as elites in a society where the public/private distinction undergirds structural privileges based on class, gender, race, and sexuality, in maintaining public confidence in the stability of the public/private boundary — and of their attendant anxiety over the scandal's potential manifestation of this boundary's constitutive instability.

Such anxiety could logically be expected to have motivated Republicans to protect the traditional public/private distinction even more strongly, given the GOP's historical opposition to policies compromising these structural privileges. And yet Republicans in Congress closed ranks behind leaders who seemed hell-bent on tearing down the existing divide between public and private, perhaps even subverting the centrality of the public/private divide in the pantheon of American values. This apparent contradiction can be traced to a peculiarly conservative qualification of the right to privacy: the notion that privacy matters only to those among us with something to hide. Judge Starr's persecution of Clinton, then, served as an occasion to rehearse and reinforce this claim and advance a more comprehensive antiprivacy political project, albeit against the resistance of some leading Democrats.

Before Starr's campaign, it was all too easy to dismiss attackers

of the value of privacy as marginal, impotent extremists. In the end, however, the widely held assumption that privacy is an unshakeable value left many unprepared for the verve and reach of the independent counsel's effort, an assumption that may prove misleading in the post-September 11 era as government scrambles to roll back civil liberties in the name of the war on terrorism. The increasingly fraught status of the value of privacy is further obscured by the understandable though erroneous belief that as long as the U.S. power and corporate elite remain committed to private property, privacy rights more generally will be accorded respect. However, though privacy rights might be thought to be a natural extension of the values that underwrite a defense of private property, for most of this nation's history a defense of private property has not been understood to entail anything like a right to privacy when it comes to the governance of domains like bodies, ideas, and actions. Indeed, it is only in the past four decades that privacy rights have been accorded legal recognition and constitutional protection in U.S. courts. And today, in cases ranging from access to abortion to the control of medical records to the enforcement of drug policy, many judges are returning to the position that privacy has a dubious grounding in the Constitution and should yield when conflicts arise with other values, such as public health, welfare, and safety.

One can hardly be surprised that government itself is attacking privacy, for privacy doctrine was born in the crucible of a fear of state power. The legitimacy of the U.S. state may still depend on maintaining faith in its ultimate, liberal commitment to respect for the public/private distinction. Nevertheless, jurisprudential trends, as well as official efforts to portray opponents of government DNA data banks and national ID cards as the enemies of security and community, suggest that other, increasingly important ideologies may well be dislodging the liberal respect for the boundary between public and private from its traditional place as one among the core elements of legitimation for the U.S. state and structures of social privilege.

Other analysts contend that, aside from its effects on privacy, the investigation and impeachment of Clinton proceeded by weakening core assumptions about how public power comes to be exercised legitimately. Specifically, these events jeopardized the presumption that conformity to the rule of law is both fundamental to legitimate public action and the key characteristic distinguishing public from private action. William E. Scheuerman argues that the impeachment made manifest certain problems deriving from the independent counsel statute that reach to the heart of the rule of law in the United States. A pre-

cise definition of the rule of law, according to Scheuerman, “requires that state action rest on norms that are *general, public, relatively clear, and stable.*” Kenneth Starr baldly violated the standards of generality, clarity, and stability, respectively, by virtue of “aggressively pursuing ‘crimes’ typically ignored in other settings,” enjoying a “vast, open-ended delegation of authority,” and constantly altering the course of his investigation in a cavalier manner.<sup>4</sup> For Andrew Arato, the impeachment belongs to a more comprehensive conservative effort to revise the Constitution by informal means, the goal being to endow Congress with selected quasi-parliamentary powers.<sup>5</sup>

The hounding of Clinton both reflected and reinigorated these broader tendencies in U.S. law and legislation, while at the same time strengthening parallel mutations in popular culture. Outside the realm of citizens and government, the public/private divide faces a different kind of challenge, one led by corporate powers who we might expect would strenuously favor maintaining a cultural commitment to the inviolability of the private sphere, which has always been understood to encompass the market. In recent years, however, corporate America has launched an aggressive and strategic campaign to undermine popular regard for privacy. The notion of the home as a sanctuary or refuge is under attack by corporations who seduce us with promises of “access” and “service” if only we will relinquish our antiquated attachment to the value of privacy. These days, every electronic portal in our homes, from the telephone to the television to the computer, provides a conduit through which corporations can hawk their wares. We are now constantly fed the idea — part Orwellian, part oxymoron — that freedom consists in the liberating opportunity to do business from the “privacy of one’s own home.” At the same time, we are being bombarded with a spate of reality television shows that allow the big media and their corporate backers to dangle the tantalizing rewards of fame before anyone willing to renounce privacy. In an era when people actually compete for the privilege of living in a house where there is a TV camera trained on the toilet, the value of privacy seems decidedly old-fashioned. Arguably, Starr’s mission to expose the details of Clinton’s anatomy and sex life to the public helped massage Americans’ transition to a new level of comfort with markedly downsized spaces of personal privacy.

Meanwhile, the distinctively public-oriented features and functions of popular culture were revealed to be in a decrepit condition by media coverage of the scandal. Despite their almost manically reiterated concern for upholding their role as mediators of democratic deliberation

(as Jodi Dean critically observes in her essay here), news organizations showed every sign of subordinating this mission to privatistic, profit-seeking interests. In an era of hard-fought competition, news organizations now face excruciating pressures to get and keep audiences while cutting costs. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel show in their analysis of reporting on the Clinton scandal, these forces have induced even the major networks and leading national newspapers to lower their standards for verifying sources' claims; to emphasize opinion, allegation, and speculation over the reporting of well-researched and substantively new information; and to adopt a "blockbuster mentality" that tries "temporarily [to] reassemble the now-fragmented mass audience" by relying on cheaply produced "formulaic stories that involve celebrity, scandal, sex, and downfall, be it O. J., Diana, or Monica-gate."<sup>6</sup> In short, the Clinton scandal paradoxically showed popular culture to be a site not only for the death of privacy but also for the withering of publicity, in the sense of a vibrant public sphere.

The Republicans' prosecution of the Clinton scandal thus displayed the multiple and varied dimensions of conservatism's general assault on the public/private divide. Nevertheless, it should not go without note that other dimensions of GOP-led conservatism aim to etch a new and enduring line separating public from private even while leaders like Kenneth Starr, Henry Hyde, and Rupert Murdoch strive to dismantle the boundary that has traditionally existed—and that sex scandals abet this project, too. In general, the right tends to define the common bonds of citizens with reference to matters of the private sphere: marriage, parenthood, work, investment, faith, and, of course, sex (or the renunciation of it). Doing this might seem to be just another way of muddying the public/private distinction, or hybridizing the two realms. But in a basic sense the public "material" in liberal society has always been drawn from the private realm, above all, the public responsibility to furnish the political preconditions for the system of private property. This deep structure of liberalism is a core element of Locke's theory; it is also precisely the aspect of bourgeois liberalism that the early Marx contended was its most dire flaw, because, for him, the elevation of "egoistic" concerns to the main substance of communal life nullified any chance that the polity could provide a genuine experience of human solidarity. The right's contemporary project registers this historical and intellectual inconsistency in liberalism in an extreme, albeit convoluted, way. Latter-day conservatism gives a jarringly explicit expression to the general, constitutive dependence in liberal society of the public realm on the private realm by the intensity

with which it declares selected private affairs in the areas of sexuality and the family to be central to the conduct of public business. At the same time, the right reestablishes the foundationalist ideology of the public/private distinction insofar as the zealotry of its pursuit of moral regulation is matched by (and cryptically reflects) its fervor for making public initiatives subservient to the dominant, private economic interests, a project that advances under the banner of respecting the rights and freedoms of individual private property owners (even as it entails massive state subsidization of corporate concerns, and hence extensive state action in bureaucratically organized markets). Conservative policies advocating choice in education, housing, and other areas of social welfare can be seen as further attempts to reinscribe this basic ideology, and to inscribe a particular understanding of what the public/private divide should look like today, inasmuch as they enhance the prerogatives of the owners of private capital to dispose of their resources without public interference.

Seen in this context, the wider assault on privacy in civil liberties, abortion, and other areas that the attack on Clinton emblemized looks much less like a wholesale dismantling of the public/private distinction. In the most charitable interpretation, it can be seen as an attempt to compensate in an exaggerated (but dangerous) way for the stark indifference of conservative economic and social policies toward the liberal principle of employing civil government to safeguard the public good. In another sense, like a not-much-fun-house mirror, conservatives' scandal politics hyperbolically reflects liberalism's bad conscience: its legitimization of the interests of the powerful by invoking the good of all.

Expressions of mass opinion about the Clinton scandal yielded similarly crosscutting implications for the public/private divide. During the scandal, and especially in the context of unprecedented Democratic gains in the 1998 congressional elections, a solid majority of the public appeared more congenially disposed toward the Democrats' invocation of liberal values than Republican civic moralism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the rhetorical strategies of the president's antagonists betrayed an acknowledgment of this reality, insofar as Starr stressed that his investigation into the Lewinsky matter was not really about sex at all, but rather perjury and other more recognizably public offenses. Yet surely there was more ambivalence in the public's stance than poll figures, election results, and the independent counsel's turns of speech indicated. Just ask Al Gore, who was hamstrung in his efforts to identify himself with the Clinton administration's successes because of the need to dis-

tance himself from the president's perceived character flaws. The latter obviously had political relevance in 2000 not only for the roughly 30 percent of the public, mainly staunch Republicans and evangelicals, who consistently favored Clinton's removal, but, more important, for moderate swing voters who were likely among the majorities voicing both disapproval of the president's personal conduct and approval of his performance in office.

So ordinary citizens gave very mixed signals about how they received the Republicans' new version of the public/private division, with its shrunken realm of privacy in matters of personal conduct. At the same time, it is important to remember that the public offered few signs at all (the most notable being the small but fervent groundswell of support for Ralph Nader in 2000) of its readiness to depart from the traditional liberal ideology, to which both major parties subscribe, that uses the public/private distinction to rationalize corporate power. However, few citizens had the opportunity to hear alternative interpretations of the scandal itself from the left media. The structural incapacity of the mainstream media to engage in critical discussion about sexual matters (especially in masculine-gendered "hard news" contexts) aggravated its ordinary tendency to exclude voices of the left, which were attempting to initiate such discussion.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the focus on sex probably made commentators on the left less willing to respond with full force to the right's crusade, not only because of a desire not to have their attention diverted from other causes like fighting poverty and promoting peace but also perhaps because of a faltering commitment on the left to sustained, critical moral reasoning on the links between erotic expression and universalist rights and values.<sup>9</sup> However one assesses the left's role vis-à-vis this problem, the situation remains that for most citizens, the controversies sex scandals raise over when and how invasions of privacy are justified, while vital concerns in themselves, have the added effect of reaffirming the overall discursive organization of political contestation in terms of a public/private boundary. In a historical situation when no counter-hegemonic force exists that is capable of effectively challenging the general presupposition that private capital interests accord with the public good, this means that sex scandals buttress the popular legitimacy of the political-economic status quo.

**Sex Scandals and the Citizen** Given these diverse impacts of sex scandals on the public/private distinction, what can the critical analysis of

sex scandals tell us specifically about experiences of political citizenship in the contemporary United States? How do sex scandals constrain or expand opportunities for citizens to take democratic action, especially action that challenges the discourses mobilized by the politically and socially dominant?

Lauren Berlant provides one model of contemporary U.S. citizenship that is especially useful for critically assessing the implications of sex scandals for the citizen. Consistent with our conceptions of the mutually constitutive relationship of the public and private realms, the productivity of sex regulation for state power, and conservatism's emphatic definition of public concerns with reference to the familial sphere, Berlant argues that in the wake of the new right's rise, "intimate things"—especially behaviors, attitudes, and identities pertaining to sex—are increasingly invoked to define the meaning of "America" and the nature of American citizenship. Berlant perhaps exaggerates the extent to which the presence of intimate concerns in the public sphere is a phenomenon of the recent past. Earlier epochs of U.S. history certainly prepared the ground for this aspect of contemporary conservatism by generating a variety of enduring valences among family, state, and nation. Historical precedents for what Berlant calls the "intimate public sphere" of the 1980s and 1990s notably include Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to justify imperialism through a nationalist rhetoric centered on (white) women's duty to bear children, the maternalist antipoverty discourses that both predated and were carried forward by the New Deal, and cold war ideology's obsession with communism's threat to the American family.<sup>10</sup> Berlant shows, however, that the conservative age of Reagan-Bush-W. Republicans and Clinton-Gore Democrats has given a distinctive twist to these earlier strategies for rooting U.S. citizenship in private, familial commitments. Today, mainstream discourses reimagine the nation as populated by citizens who are identified *as* citizens not just by virtue of their orientations toward family and sexuality but more specifically through their "infantile" relationship to the nation.

Infantilizing the citizen means figuring the citizen as a being in grave peril and endangered by threats circulating within the private realm, above all, threats concerning childbearing and sexuality. For Berlant, the endlessly reproduced images of fetuses and children that saturate our popular culture furnish the key symbols for this mode of citizenship. Perpetually vulnerable to being traumatized by sexual predators and errant or unwilling mothers, the infantile citizen finds protection in the arms of the nation that gears up to monitor, reform, incapacitate, or

expel these internal deviants.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when the discourses of national policy formation are mobilized to cleanse the Internet of pornography, “defend marriage” against homosexual incursions on its traditional meaning, provide “opportunities” to women and children “imprisoned” by cycles of “welfare dependency,” and restrict abortion, the therewith infantilized resident acquires both self-knowledge and public recognition as a citizen.

Sex scandals, we would argue, reinvigorate this figure of the “citizen-victim” by providing occasions to rehearse the discourse of dismay over the exposure of children to sexually explicit material, which the reporting on the scandal inevitably enacts. The Clinton scandal recited the emergent norm of infantile citizenship in an additional way when conservatives attempted to portray Lewinsky as a vulnerable intern. Lewinsky thus in one sense came to typify the traumatized subject-position of the citizen-victim in desperate need of the state’s paternalistic protection (even while, as the “stalker,” she also personified a variety of aggressively feminine threats to sexual normativity). Clinton, too, was cast as a citizen-victim by various forces with divergent objectives. Some on the left tried to seize the victim narrative for Clinton’s defense, portraying him as a “sex addict” in dire need of professional help. More commonly, the notion that Clinton fell prey to the exorbitancy of his own desires was woven into less sympathetic discourses stereotyping him (and his roaming, unmanageable, and putatively tasteless appetites) as the product of his “white trash” background.<sup>12</sup> Here, Clinton’s identity as white trash, certified by his apparent inability to control his own body, served as a particular permutation of his more general infantilism. On the one hand, we might have expected efforts to infantilize Clinton (whether from the left or the right) to fail, for as the personification of the masculinized state the president’s role was to lend succor to the feminized and infantilized nation, not to model its imperiled condition. On the other hand, insofar as U.S. citizenship increasingly takes shape as an experience of personal identification with the nation’s leader rather than a more critical-rational experience of representation and agency, the characterization of Clinton as a citizen-victim can be seen as both inevitable and functional, in the sense of reproducing this mode of citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

Is it possible, however, that the Clinton scandal may have also nourished more autonomous and mature forms of citizenship by reawakening the public to a more traditionally liberal sense of the distinction between political leaders’ private conduct and public responsibilities? Liberalism presumes that citizens are rational beings capable of dis-

cerning the public interest and holding accountable those public officials whose private conduct egregiously interferes with their public duties or who misuse public powers to serve private ends. The Clinton scandal generated open controversy over whether the president's actions had violated the public trust, and more generally over the proper distinction between public and private affairs. In doing so, it arguably stimulated some citizens who otherwise would not have done so to reflect critically on both the content of the public interest and its categorical differences from private affairs. It rather more clearly motivated some to hold public officials accountable, by favoring the Democrats in the 1998 elections, for trying to make partisan advantage masquerade as the public good. To be sure, as we have argued, it would be unwise to take at face value these election results and the polled majorities approving of Clinton's job performance and opposing his removal from office while disapproving of his personal conduct. But these indicators of critical thinking and action by citizens, crude though they are, are still of some worth and suggest that many U.S. citizens may not have regressed to the degree one would surmise from reading Berlant.

Even if this more optimistic view of citizens' responses to the Clinton scandal is warranted, however, sex scandals still contribute powerfully to the culture of depoliticization analyzed by Berlant. That is because the autonomously and critically reasoning citizen of liberalism is not necessarily a democratic citizen who is inclined toward participatory and inclusive deliberation or communication. For Berlant, regular exposure to the media's coverage of the events it defines as national crises ensures that "the infantile citizen has a memory of the nation and a tactical relation to its operation. But no vision of sustained individual or collective criticism and agency accompanies the national system here."<sup>14</sup> Insofar as the Clinton scandal resensitized people to their rights, responsibilities, and capacities as citizens in a liberal polity, this scandal actually may have bolstered "individual criticism and agency." But even so, the scandal worked against this same effect, while intensifying the decline in "collective criticism and agency." It did this by recirculating the discourse of citizen-victimhood and celebrating citizenship as consumerism incited by "the national culture industry [that] provides information about the United States but has no interest in producing knowledge that would change anything."<sup>15</sup> Further, and ironically, precisely inasmuch as it restored vitality to the liberal model of citizenship and the principle of an inviolable private sphere, the Clinton scandal may have depressed democratic energies. For in a liberal polity where the private realm furnishes the substance of public

life, there is necessarily an underdevelopment of political citizenship as a distinctive human activity in its own right—as something that is not reducible to the individual or factional pursuit of interest satisfaction.

Nevertheless, it is still possible for sex scandals to create opportunities for political interventions that enhance democracy. One way they can do this is by inspiring a critical awareness among ordinary citizens of the constructed and ideological character of the public/private divide. Party and media elites are unlikely to pursue the deconstruction of discourse organized around a distinction between public and private because of their investments in the social privileges this dichotomy supports. As we have argued, however, sex scandals inevitably bring the tenuousness of this binary to the fore. They thereby provide openings for ordinary citizens to use these events to develop their own critiques of the hegemonic versions of the public interest and the commonsense conceptions of privacy against which these reigning conceptions are defined. In addition, sex scandals can function as an occasion for the entry of new voices and new perspectives into public discourse, subverting exclusions that historically have been justified on the grounds that the relationships among power, sex, and sexuality are not proper subjects for political discussion. To be sure, sex scandals may reinforce masculinist, racist, and homophobic understandings of the public/private divide, as well as those conducive to class domination, by virtue of the categories mobilized to order the discursive relationship between sexuality and public power.<sup>16</sup> But at the same time, sex scandals can illuminate pathways citizens can take to reconstruct the public/private divide and its various valences with class, gender, race, and sexuality.

**Sex Scandals and the Production of Political Identities** Beyond reproducing and destabilizing hegemonic discourses concerning the meaning of public and private, sex scandals invariably bring to the surface certain specific ways in which regulation of the body geared toward the production of sexual, gender, and sex identities is central to the circulation of power in this society. On first sight, these effects appear focused on the male/masculine body: in U.S. politics, it seems that only men are capable of spawning a sex scandal, just as only women can beget “nannygates.” However, the gendering of both kinds of scandal requires critical explanation given the undeniable fact that people of both sexes have tawdry affairs and hire illegal immi-

grants as domestic help. The gendering of scandal tells us something important about the ways gendered and sexed bodies are constructed via these media events.

For women, the process of gender/sex identity construction reflects deeply entrenched societal expectations that women devote themselves primarily to the nurture of children. Thus the nannygates of Zoë Baird (one of President Clinton's early choices for attorney general) and Linda Chavez (whom President George W. Bush originally tapped to head the Department of Labor), while scuttling the Senate's confirmation of these women to executive office, ritually reconfirmed various tropes in the construction of American femininity, including the obligatory guilt of mothers with professional careers and the responsibility of motherhood to safeguard the nation, embodied in the nuclear family, from "invasion" by foreign elements. In this way, nannygates serve to "put in their place" those women who disregard the enduring cultural imperative to stay within the boundaries of the home.

Like nannygates, sex scandals, too, are a way of keeping men in their proper place. Traditionally, the private sphere — the feminine realm — is concerned with satisfying bodily needs and pleasure, while the public sphere has been regarded as a higher realm governed by the logic of disembodied rationality. Sex scandals penalize public men who fall prey to carnal urgings. To be sure, virility is a core political value in the United States, but the man who *needs* sex undermines his own claim to manliness, a victim of desire rather than its master. Significantly, however, until the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, with its revelations that Clinton had transgressed the norms of straight sex, sex scandals did not make an issue of the man's sexual behavior as such. This intensification of the regulation of the male body lends support to Berlant's insight that one of the key characteristics of the emergent "intimate public sphere" is that "formerly iconic" white/male/heterosexual citizens have lost "the freedom to feel unmarked" and "sense that they now have *identities*, when it used to be just other people who had them" — in this case, more diligently monitored *sexual* identities.<sup>17</sup> Clarence Thomas's alleged come-ons to Anita Hill were not only less noteworthy as sex acts in themselves; they were also inherently less shocking and consequential to a public historically accustomed to the discursive thematization and regulation of black male sexuality. This historical context made it very difficult for Thomas to try to defend his sexual conduct per se as adhering to the norm. Instead, he (and his advocates on the Senate Judiciary Committee) responded by emphasizing his personification of other norms of masculinity by stressing

his devotion to his wife and narrating his personal history as a story of heroic, self-motivated, individual achievement in his chosen career.<sup>18</sup> Sex scandals thus further show men their social “place” by reaffirming the importance of both employment and marriage as such (rather than a family role that would include fatherhood) for normative masculinity. When Gary Hart and Bill Clinton launched public relations counteroffensives to media revelations regarding their affairs, respectively, with Donna Rice and Gennifer Flowers, in both cases it was crucially with their faithful wife by their side. Both candidates knew that strategically it was vital to respond to the charges of illicit *sex* by stressing their strong dedication to the institution of *marriage*.

Thomas also used the historical backdrop of racist discourse to his advantage, however, turning the tables on Hill by appealing to well-worn stereotypes of African American women as hypersexual (images deployed, for instance, to justify white men’s rape of black women under slavery) to make her very accusations seem like evidence of her own sexual depravity.<sup>19</sup> Thomas’s success in this regard points to another important aspect of the gendered (and engendering) aspects of sex scandals: although the direct targets of these stagings of regulatory practices are men, these events usually also rehearse gender norms pertaining to femininity — which is logically to be expected, given that in a basic sense the construction of masculinity depends on the establishment of its difference from the feminine other. Thus sex scandals reliably police women’s sexual behavior, too, most frequently whenever the far-too-familiar type of the vamp rears her seductive head, as in the media’s presentations of Rice, Flowers, and Lewinsky. And as the example of Thomas’s successful demonization of Hill illustrates, sex scandals furnish scenes not simply for the recitation of gender norms defining femininity as such but more precisely for the reiteration of norms differentiating femininities (as well as masculinities) in terms of race (and class, as the endless derision lobbed at Clinton’s “bimbos” with “big hair” typified).

It should additionally be noted that the reiteration of norms governing gender, racial, and sexual identity in the context of sex scandals does not exclusively depend on the performative recitation of normative identities by those directly involved in the scandal. Sex scandals call on members of the public, too, to join in this process of actualizing political-cultural identities. Martin Plot argues that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair generated a “deliberative scene,” defined as an “extraordinary moment when a body politic is transversally mobilized and called upon to monitor and reflect upon its own rules for public

life.” Plot stresses that the outcomes of these processes are by their nature indeterminate and open to the efficacious involvement of the public, not simply despite the fact that they are set in motion by the corporate media but also because the media tend to abandon routine “scripts” and “turn from reporting to monitoring” in these contexts.<sup>20</sup> Plot’s overexuberant optimism about the indeterminacy and substantively deliberative character of such “scenes” is, in our view, in need of some qualification. A hard look must be taken at how existing matrices of discursive power always already set the conditions of the possible when publics, “the public” as a general entity, or members of the public attempt to engage in self-reflection on the “rules for public life.” Nevertheless, we heartily endorse the broader implication of Plot’s argument: that sex scandals invariably involve ordinary citizens as active participants in nation-making processes. Indeed, the fact that sex scandals eagerly invite the public—and not just the protagonists in the tale of scandal—to perform and reiterate social norms is probably another important reason why the shame evoked in sex scandals never stays solely confined to the person accused of wrongdoing but invariably envelops the public as well.

Our approach to sex scandals thus takes it as axiomatic that a scandal never simply “is.” Rather, a scandal is a discursive construct, a story that is told and may be retold by a variety of different narrators, including those who are not officially charged with the task of rehearsing the scandalous material in the media and in the halls of government. Unfortunately, conventional ways of interpreting the events occurring during a scandal tend to assume a hierarchy of agency that places citizens-consumers on the lowest, most passive rung. When a scandal is narrated as a story about government actions to investigate allegations of corruption, the characters usually fall into these familiar types: politicians are the primary agents, the media transmit information about political leaders’ actions to the public, and the citizenry is generally passive, its contribution limited to the indirect power of judgment that it exercises through polls and the franchise.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, scandals may be more cynically conceived as entertainment, a diversion for the masses from the obligations of work and other responsibilities, including that of substantive political engagement. From this perspective, scandals are complex cultural productions where the roles again seem easily identifiable: politicians are the leading actors, the media are the producers, and TV watchers make up the audience, whose role is to consume the spectacle obediently, perhaps occasionally expressing diffuse sentiments of satisfaction or dis-

satisfaction with the conduct or outcome of the investigation (and this more for the sake of seasoning the scandal story with a mildly savory subplot about the public's feelings than for the purpose of tangibly influencing the course of events).<sup>22</sup>

Both these modes of framing scandals obscure the possibility for discursive agency that a scandal provides ordinary citizens. To assess the political purchase of these opportunities, it is necessary to inquire into what sex scandals tell us about how public discourses reflect and reproduce the power of dominant institutions and normative identities. At the same time, it is essential to investigate openings for reappropriations of hegemonic discourses. Without denying the significance of the obstacles facing those outside the media elite who seek to be heard in public discourse—obstacles rooted in gross inequalities of resources as well as the less tangible but equally important disparities in access and privilege—the exclusion is not, and cannot be, total. For those committed to reversing the processes by which citizenship is being rendered entirely passive, virtual, and symbolic, the question is how to exploit the cracks in the regime of exclusion as opportunities for new voices to be heard.

It is clearly beyond our scope here either to provide a full assessment of the nature of the challenge that lies ahead or to offer a comprehensive solution. But we would like to highlight the following points as worthy of consideration for the development of such a counter-hegemonic project. First, as suggested above, sex scandals threaten to expose the contingency of the public/private divide and thus to denaturalize the social privileges depending on this ideology. These privileges include not only those supported by a system of private property, but also protection from the regulation of oppressions practiced within the domestic sphere. Here, then, are opportunities for citizens to turn these events, which are otherwise salad days for the corporate media, into launching points for critiques of the very social inequalities that stratify access to the media. Of course, the trick is to contest the ideological implications of the public/private divide, especially with regard to private property, while at the same time vigorously defending the value and right of privacy as an aspect of individual freedom.

Second, citizens interested in a more democratic polity can highlight the ways sex scandals not only rearticulate given norms regarding gender, race, and sexuality, but also carry forward the necessary and constitutive contradictions within those norms. As Judith Butler argues, there is a “*deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition*” of “regulatory ideals” such as femininity, masculinity, white-

ness, and heterosexuality. The invocation of a norm itself exposes the “gaps and fissures” within it, the impossibility of ever fully occupying the subject-position it articulates.<sup>23</sup> It should be possible, for instance, to amplify the static noise interfering with regnant codes of masculinity and male sexuality by representations of Clinton’s body and desires in the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, while still avoiding any naïve heroization of the sexual and gender politics of the president who signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act and welfare “reform.”

Third, at a time of increasingly mediated citizenship, it is clear that there is a new citizenship skill to be learned: how to reappropriate the news, how to use the media to tell our own stories. This seizure of voice can be accomplished only by citizens savvy about not just message but medium, citizens who know as much about news cycles as they do election cycles, citizens who not only appreciate the essential presence of “spin” in the delivery of the news but who are themselves capable of producing counterspin. This should not mean simply adapting to the rapidly evolving and disturbing structures of news reporting in the current era. As noted above, furious economic competition among media enterprises has spawned “the continuous news cycle, the growing power of sources over reporters, varying standards of journalism, and a fascination with inexpensive, polarizing argument.”<sup>24</sup> Media coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal epitomized and intensified these tendencies. Simply to play along would yield at best a Pyrrhic victory for citizens concerned about expropriating the media as an instrument of popular accountability. Nevertheless, in a society populated by masses of people and stretching over vast territories, finding a way to use the media to broadcast messages to potentially sympathetic strangers, without having these messages completely altered by media routines, is simply an unavoidable element of any political strategy that has a chance of effecting widespread change.

**Synopsis of the Book** In studying the politics of sex scandals, it is important to address the workings of those institutions explicitly charged with the authority to govern or to articulate the public’s voice, as some recent writings on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair have done. It is also vital, however, to examine other significant institutional and cultural contexts in which sex scandals unleash and perpetuate effects of power—from Hollywood to Christian right radio; from feminist debates over core principles to African American struggles over the civil rights legacy; and in the rituals of citizenship, whether mediated by the

consumption opportunities Americans are graced with in their public sphere or by their routine participation in the “society of the spectacle.” *Public Affairs* both broadens the institutional focus and cuts across the realms traditionally distinguished as “state” and “culture.” What institutional conditions give rise to sex scandals not as aberrations but as unintended by-products arising in the course of ordinary operations? What do these insights into institutional dynamics reveal about the challenges and possibilities for unsettling patterns of domination based on class, race, gender, and sexuality?

The essays in this collection have been arranged into three roughly defined groups. The essays in part 1 seek to furnish a variety of broader contexts within which to situate contemporary sex scandals in U.S. politics, including earlier political sex scandals, the history of U.S. political scandals in general, and narrations of sex scandals in institutional spheres beyond the realm of politics. The authors in part 2 focus on how the Clinton scandal revealed and reinforced, but also potentially destabilized and refashioned, the discursive conditions for feminist and antiracist politics, as well as activism geared toward economic justice. Part 3 investigates the institutional parameters within which any attempts by citizens to contest the antidemocratic and illiberal effects of sex scandals must be mobilized. The final three essays thus reflect broadly on sex scandals, major media events, and the conditions of public interaction in the contemporary United States, debating the possibility of critical agency in the “society of the spectacle” and the functions of the concept of the public sphere as both normative ideal and ideological fetish.

Joshua Gamson demonstrates that sex scandals tend to follow strikingly similar narrative trajectories in a variety of institutional contexts, including the political, religious, and corporate-entertainment worlds. Gamson looks at news coverage of three recent scandals involving men whose dealings with prostitutes were exposed to the public: televangelist Jimmy Swaggart’s encounter with prostitute Debra Murphree in 1988, actor Hugh Grant’s liaison with prostitute Divine Brown in 1995, and presidential advisor Dick Morris’s tryst with prostitute Sherry Rowlands in 1996. Gamson shows how, in some ways, scandal reportage yields disparate story-lines depending on the particular features of persons and events (in Swaggart’s case, hypocrisy became the main issue, whereas Grant was criticized for excessive risk taking and Morris for his putative amorality). These cases also enable us to see, however, how, across institutional fields, news coverage tends to follow a similar pattern: sex as such rapidly disappears, while

the scandalous behavior gradually becomes normalized as the institutional context for the sexual behavior comes into focus. Scandal stories thus become not so much tales of individual failings as demonstrations of the routine moral compromises required by specific, public institutional roles. These dramatizations of the perilous (but seemingly inevitable, hence in a keen sense tragic) consequences of institutional responsibility ironically end up buttressing rather than undercutting the legitimacy of these institutions, even while manifesting their deep corruption.

Theodore J. Lowi's essay furnishes a broad context for analyzing contemporary political sex scandals in another way, by examining the long history of political scandals in the United States. Lowi figures scandal as a commodity that is exchanged among political contestants under variable "market" conditions. U.S. history has thus witnessed an irregular succession of bull and bear markets in political scandal, when political actors have thought it relatively more or less profitable to invest political resources in scandal investigation. For Lowi, scandal-trading gains appeal in periods when the party system is "deranged": when the party system cannot effectively process political conflict because of great unevenness in the partisan balance of power (or, more recently, the creation of weakly contested party strongholds in different constitutionally defined institutional contexts under conditions of "divided government"). Political scandals sometimes call forth rivers of pious talk about constitutional principles and the rule of law, as the impeachment of President Clinton notoriously did. Reading Lowi, however, we learn that these events are symptomatic of a *failure* of confidence in the Madisonian thesis that private ambitions can be constitutionally channeled in ways that serve public purposes. They also reveal dysfunctions in that shadow institutional realm without which, Lowi contends, constitutional government could never operate democratically: the realm of political parties. Like Gamson, then, Lowi finds that scandals illuminate and further entrench the failings of U.S. public institutions, although he is more critical than Gamson of how these episodes affect the institutions' durability.

Joshua D. Rothman further fleshes out the historical context for contemporary sex scandals in U.S. politics by excavating relics from what could have been the nation's first major sex scandal: the revelation in 1802 of the relationship between President Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. Rothman asks why this turned out to be a "sex scandal that wasn't": why journalist James Callender's publicization of Jefferson's affair with Hemings elicited so little response of a serious

nature from Jefferson's political opponents. Contemporary readers, Rothman stresses, must rid themselves of any illusions that earlier eras of U.S. political history were less tarnished by the politics of personal attack than the present; in this period, in particular, political conflict tended to be intensely personalized. Nonetheless, Jefferson's Federalist enemies declined to inflame the Hemings affair into a full-fledged scandal. They chose not to do this for a variety of reasons, Rothman argues, above all out of respect for the ethical obligation among white men of privilege to maintain a gentlemanly silence in the national public sphere about slave owners' routine sexual abuse of their female slaves both as a form of domination and for personal gratification. Although Rothman himself does not transpose this analysis into a critical-theoretical register, his revealing and finely wrought account nonetheless makes it quite clear that in this "classical" era (and locus) of the bourgeois-liberal public sphere, a robust construction of the public/private divide generated specific zones of privacy inflected by race and class—and, increasingly, regard for the bourgeois family. He shows, moreover, that sex scandals had a notably less significant role in the stabilization and destabilization of the public/private distinction. This was mainly because of the general unwillingness to challenge the pretense of sexual-moral rectitude that safeguarded the power of upper-class white men. Precisely the ability of such hypocrisy to function smoothly in this manner marks a key contrast between Jefferson's era and our own. Although the Clinton scandal, for example, arguably reaffirmed the privileges of bourgeois masculinity insofar as Clinton's presumed access to sexual favors from female subordinates reinstated and reinforced traditional practices, the fact that not only Clinton but also Representatives Hyde and Livingston were called upon to atone publicly for transgressing their marital vows reveals the extent to which times have indeed changed.

From here, the book turns to a focused analysis of the discursive environment generated and reproduced by the Clinton scandal and the consequences of these discursive power plays for a variety of counter-hegemonic projects. Taking an in-depth look at evangelical conservative talk radio, Paul Apostolidis argues that stories of Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair furnished genealogical reference points for the Christian right's outraged reception of the Clinton scandals. Narratives of these earlier scandals channel egalitarian hopes toward personal identification with political leaders, seeking to justify authoritarian leadership of the sort exposed by Watergate and Iran-Contra.

In this way, Christian right popular culture makes its adherents more comfortable with the general situation faced by all Americans: a crisis of democratic accountability, traceable in key ways to the advent of the post-Fordist structure of capital accumulation and state organization, that is far advanced in electoral and legislative institutions yet remains unaddressed in an ideological climate dominated by the politics of personalistic populism. Apostolidis's essay thus not only sheds light on the clash between the Christian right and Clinton; it also uses "scandal stories" to uncover the narrative conditions of pseudo-democratic leadership under post-Fordism more generally, as well as the potential for mobilizing counternarratives of leadership that stress the dependence of political equality and citizen power on economic justice.

George Shulman advances the discussion of the right's rhetoric in the Clinton scandal by contemplating the ways conservatives deployed jeremiadic discourses about race and the sixties in their attempt to bring Clinton down. In addition, moving beyond Rothman's analysis of a much earlier era, Shulman shows that today it is still the case that racial meanings are never far beneath the surface (if indeed they are hidden at all) when ideological work must be done to shore up the dominant norm of American individualism. For Shulman, according to the conservative ideal of possessive individualism, the American male's abilities to wisely manage private property and political freedom are vouchsafed by his sexual self-control. Ambivalence about such self-restraint, however, has traditionally led to the displacement of sexual longings onto people of color, especially African Americans. Thus, Shulman argues, attempts from the political right to reinvigorate possessive individualism have usually been accompanied by renewed calls for sexual puritanism and fortified racial oppression. The new right's long-term project of reversing the social, sexual, and racial progressivism of the sixties has proceeded exactly along these lines. This provides a major reason Republicans found Clinton's pursuit of sexual pleasure outside the bounds of procreation, marriage, and convention to be such an abomination. It also yields a key insight into the racial subtext of Clinton's impeachment. Shulman believes that certain of Clinton's defenders—in particular, Toni Morrison, who famously called on liberals and African Americans to close ranks behind "our first black president"—too uncritically reproduced both the right's "blacking up" of Clinton and its strategy of narrating nationhood through invocations of racial identity. He still finds room for hope, however, that articulations of a national "we" can be per-

formed that can include both negative, “counternational testimonies” (like those for which Morrison herself is known) and appeals to common democratic aspirations.

Like Shulman, Anna Marie Smith criticizes the tendency in the attempt to defend Clinton against the right’s onslaught to gloss over or rationalize certain elements of his policy legacy that were far from progressive. Whereas Shulman points out the dissonance between Clinton’s record on racial issues and his imputed status as the country’s “first black president,” Smith explores the political and rhetorical strategies Clinton and his handlers employed to promote the image of himself as pro-woman. Smith identifies an “ironic logic of two juxtapositions.” First, she finds that Clinton was able to define himself as a pro-woman president despite his spotty record of commitment to public policies promoting women’s interests. This became possible, she argues, by virtue of the symbolic power of his marriage to a capable, empowered, and professionally successful woman. Second, Smith observes that Clinton’s trysts with Lewinsky occurred during a period when the scrutiny of space and presidential access in the White House was at its most intense because of the government shutdown of 1995 and the Clinton staff’s efforts to enhance its professionalism. Why should the physical logistics of the president’s liaisons with Lewinsky matter to feminists? Because, Smith contends, they underscore the fact that “one of the most infamous extramarital affairs of the century was conducted in a workplace.” They thus furnish feminists with an opportunity to stress the difference between sexual harassment and consensual sex, against strenuous conservative efforts to muddy this distinction, and despite receiving no help in this regard from Clinton. They further enable activists to address sexual harassment through strategies that collectively empower workers to confront a wide range of harmful practices by employers and supervisors, in lieu of what Smith calls a “one-size-fits-all prohibition of sex in the workplace” that saddles feminists with the unsavory task of policing sexual behavior. Working insistently at the intersection of class- and gender-based power relations, Smith thus caps off the demonstration in Part Two of the overlapping—and contestable—dynamics of class, race, and gender in the current conservative hegemonic order, which the Clinton scandal both underscored and opened to challenge.

While the essays in Part Two share the assumption that the Clinton scandal reveals important aspects of social power relations and calls for active engagement in (feminist, anti-racist, working-class) politics, the authors in Part Three more pointedly interrogate the conditions

of public engagement as such in the United States today, as well as publicity's relation to a nonpublic zone. Juliet A. Williams notes that in the wake of the Starr probe, there is evidence of a growing popular movement to revive and restore privacy, not just as a legal right but as a cultural norm. Williams is critical of this trend, and issues a series of warnings about the dangers of a renewed commitment to privacy doctrine. "Privacy in the (Too Much) Information Age" begins with a study of the logic and history of privacy doctrine in U.S. law. Although the right to privacy is commonly understood to protect individual autonomy, Williams contends that the law of privacy has been elaborated by the courts in a way that promotes socially sanctioned lifestyles while enabling the regulation of those who reject dominant moral ideals. Instead of confronting the limitations of privacy doctrine, however, Williams notes a pervasive tendency to dismiss critics of the privacy ideal, especially those feminist theorists and activists who have insisted that "the personal is political." Rather than defending the embattled privacy ideal, Williams encourages us to move beyond the rigidly conceived dichotomy between the spheres of public and private. Though the idea of inviolable privacy rights has obvious appeal, especially after the at times excruciating ordeal of the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr affair, the complexities and ambiguities of the contemporary social world demand new imaginings of social space and relationships within it.

While Williams thus recommends a new, ideologically creative form of political involvement, beyond the defense of privacy, Jeremy Varon raises the sobering question of just how possible this may be in the age of spectacle. He thereby shifts the methodological focus from hermeneutical strategies of unpacking the discourses circulated through the scandal to the forms in which the scandal was experienced. The "society of the spectacle," classically theorized by Guy Debord, still defines our social experience, Varon argues, and the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr affair epitomized this condition. Viewing the spectacular unfolding of the scandal's events as such served as the crucial means by which Americans organized collective and private memory, created shared vocabularies, and affirmed a sense of their Americanness. In this, the Clinton scandal rehearsed similar rituals of watching enacted previously by the O. J. Simpson chase and trial, the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, the coverage of Princess Diana's death and funeral . . . and the list goes on. Emphasizing Debord's critical, not just descriptive, intent, Varon ponders the dimensions of the political real that elude Americans' collective consciousness and capacities

for agency under the reign of the spectacle, dimensions whose contours may have been suggested in an appalling and shocking way by the events of September 11, 2001.

Jodi Dean helps us define the problem even more acutely and specifically: How can Americans disengage from the spectacle and carry out rational-critical debate over “real” political issues when, as the Clinton scandal illustrated, the media themselves now routinely use self-evaluations (and self-flagellations) regarding their own failure to meet the ideal of critical publicity as a technique for padding their audiences? Dean’s answer, in a spirit contrasting with both Williams’ and Varon’s interventions, is to throw open the very concept of the public sphere for radical critique and ultimately to reject it in the name of democracy. For Dean, the elements of spectacle and media-driven consumerism that attended the Clinton-Lewinsky affair did not thwart the democratic aspirations of the public sphere because the Habermasian binary between consumer culture and a democratic public sphere itself should be questioned. The consumerist spectacle as such is not the enemy of democracy, Dean insists, because the development of a “global technoculture” has dramatically increased the inclusiveness and participatory qualities of mediated spaces in terms of race, sex, and class. It is rather the ideal of rational-critical publicity, turned into a fetish, that operates ideologically today by constituting the public as the compulsive discussants of revealed secrets (whose need for the disclosure of further secret knowledge grows ever greater) rather than as an active citizenry.

Both commonalities and divergences, in methodology and interpretation alike, thus criss-cross the essays in this collection. Our hope, ultimately, is that *Public Affairs* productively raises and specifies a number of controversies for democratic politics in the United States in the age of sex scandals. Do sex scandals reinforce the power of existing economic, cultural, and political institutions, or hasten their debilitation? Can sex scandals generate real opportunities for citizens committed to feminist and antiracist politics to engage in the battle over the construction of public discourses and the meanings of the key words that prominently circulate through these discourses (“our first black president,” “a pro-woman president,” “the personal is political”), even while they induce some left-oriented scholar-activists to reinscribe racist and/or sexist understandings of American nationhood and political subjectivity—and even under the conditions of the Debordian spectacle? How far is the transformative power of feminist, antiracist, and class-egalitarian discursive interventions limited

by the tendencies of sex scandals to revalidate uncritically the moral authority of core social and political institutions, to hasten the corrosion of party-based mechanisms for ensuring democratic accountability, to generate consent to a post-Fordist political economy marked by deep contradictions, to realize the ideal of the deliberative public sphere as nothing but ideology, and to dissolve all public communication into spellbound fascination with the consumerist spectacle? Does the recent proliferation of sex scandals suggest the need to rekindle public commitment to traditional principles of U.S. governance and modern political theory, or to revitalize modernist-redemptive critiques of the institutions that draw on earlier Marxist and feminist traditions and precedent struggles for racial equality, or to take up the postmodernist (anti)project of becoming active citizens within spectacular technoculture?

While we mean to open all these questions for discussion, there is still a general sense characterizing almost all of the pieces here that the tendencies of sex scandals to reinforce patterns of domination do not and cannot determine the politics of sex scandals in a pure and simple manner. Rather than merely eliciting ripples of ashamed, self-indulgent, and voyeuristic twittering, sex scandals send profound tremors through the discursive tectonics of politics in the United States. For citizens, the primary task is to take the measure of these shocks and quakes and amplify their magnitude in ways that maximally expose and begin to address the faultlines rending U.S. democracy.

## Notes

- 1 Dana D. Nelson and Tyler Curtain, "The Symbolics of Presidentialism: Sex and Democratic Identification," in *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest*, ed. Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 34–52; Anne Cvetkovich, "Sexuality's Archive: The Evidence of the Starr Report," in Berlant and Duggan, 268–82.
- 2 We are grateful to an anonymous reader for the insightful suggestion that in cases in which the alleged perpetrator of a scandalous act tries to cover up a misdeed, there may in fact be a triple boundary crossing: a transgression of a social norm (such as having sex outside of marriage or stealing public funds); the publicization of the transgression; and revelations of efforts at a cover-up. All three of these stages unfolded, for example, in the Clinton, Nixon, and Oliver North scandals.
- 3 For example, see Robin Gaster, "Sex, Spies, and Scandal: The Pro-

- fumo Affair and British Politics,” in Andrei S. Markovits and Mark Silverstein, eds., *The Politics of Scandal: Power and Process in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 62–88; Anthony King, “Sex, Money, and Power,” in *Politics in Britain and the United States: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Richard Hodder-Williams and James Ceaser (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986).
- 4 William E. Scheuerman, “Kenneth Starr’s Rule of Law—and Ours,” *Constellations* 6.2 (June 1999): 137–41.
  - 5 Andrew Arato, “Impeachment or Revision of the Constitution?” *Constellations* 6.2 (June 1999): 145–56.
  - 6 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media* (New York: Century Foundation Press, 1999), 1–9.
  - 7 Molly W. Andolina and Clyde Wilcox, “Public Opinion: The Paradoxes of Clinton’s Popularity,” in Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 171–94.
  - 8 Sasha Torres, “Sex of a Kind: On Graphic Language and the Modesty of Television News,” in Berlant and Duggan, 102–15.
  - 9 Eric O. Clarke, “Sex and Civility,” in Berlant and Duggan, 285–90.
  - 10 See Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 245.
  - 11 Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–4.
  - 12 See Micki McElya, “Trashing the Presidency: Race, Class, and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair,” in Berlant and Duggan, 156–74.
  - 13 On this logic of “presidentialism” as the defining form of American citizenship, see Nelson and Curtin, “The Symbolics of Presidentialism: Sex and Democratic Identification,” 34–52.
  - 14 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 50–51.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, 51–52.
  - 16 Hence, for example, the (self-)scripting of Clarence Thomas as the victim of Anita Hill’s imputed sexual predations made it difficult for this scandal to inspire either a new interest in the sexual mistreatment of African American women as an important public concern, or a new critical awareness of stereotypes blaming black women themselves (specifically, their supposedly outlandish bodily desires and alleged character flaws, matters by definition “private”) for the rape and harassment they have endured. As Berlant puts it, invocations of the sexualized citizen-victim tend to “dilute oppositional discourses” by assimilating more specific questions of justice into the narrow confines of this formula. See Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington*

- City*, 2; Homi K. Bhabha, "A Good Judge of Character: Men, Metaphors, and the Common Culture," in Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 232–50; Claudia Brodsky Lacour, "Doing Things with Words: 'Racism' as Speech Act and the Undoing of Justice," in Morrison, 127–58; Nell Irvin Painter, "Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype," in Morrison, 200–214.
- 17 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 2.
  - 18 See Bhabha, "A Good Judge of Character"; Painter, "Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype"; and Gayle Pemberton, "A Sentimental Journey: James Baldwin and the Thomas-Hill Hearings," in Morrison, 172–99.
  - 19 See Bhabha, "A Good Judge of Character"; Painter, "Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype"; and Gayle Pemberton, "A Sentimental Journey: James Baldwin and the Thomas-Hill Hearings."
  - 20 Martin Plot, "Deliberative Scenes and Democratic Politics in the Lewinsky Case," *Constellations* 6.2 (June 1999): 167, 172–73.
  - 21 A recent collection of essays on the Clinton scandal edited by Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal*, featuring the work of mainstream political scientists, offers a good example of this sort of interpretive framework. The pieces in this volume reflect thoughtfully and critically on the institutional origins and implications of the Clinton scandal, mainly within the sphere of government. Some especially provocative pieces here provide insights into the ways the independent counsel statute and various court decisions have channeled and circumscribed the agency of presidents and congressional leaders. Throughout the book, however, the citizenry appears only as the source for polled information about public opinion and as an electorate.
  - 22 A more sophisticated and critical approach to analyzing scandal along these lines contends that the politics of scandals emanates more from scandals' formal-practical than their substantive narrative characteristics. In this collection, Jeremy Varon takes precisely this tack, revealing how the Clinton scandal was driven by and reproduced the logic of the spectacle, in Guy Debord's terms.
  - 23 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.
  - 24 Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed*, 1–9.